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Testimony before the Senate Commerce Committee Hearing on "The Impact of Interactive Violence on Children, " chaired by Senator Sam Brownback.

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My comments this morning must be brief. Much of what I will discuss is found in a new book I am working on entitled *Children and Hyperreality: The Loss of the Real in Contemporary Childhood and Adolescence*. It continues a line of inquiry I began in 1991 with *Video Kids: Making Sense of Nintendo*[1], as well as in a number of articles and book chapters.[2] In this work, I am arguing that children and teenagers are spending much of their time in simulations, rather than in the natural or "real" world. It is an argument, which if true, has serious implications for not only our children, but also for the future of our society. Essentially, I believe that the unreal, the simulation, the *simulacra* has been substituted for the real in the lives of our children. This occurs at many different levels: in the video games that are so much a part of the experience of contemporary childhood; in the shopping malls and "commercial civic spaces" where our children spend so much of their time; in television programs, advertisements and movies; in the theme parks where we vacation; in the online chat rooms and discussion programs through which we communicate and exchange information; and finally, in the images of beauty and sexuality that run as a powerful undercurrent through much of our culture and the lives of our children.

As suggested above, the hyperrealities that increasingly shape and define the experience of childhood and adolescence come in many different shapes and forms. Some are clearly more detrimental than others.

Since this hearing focuses on "The Impact of Interactive Violence on Children," I will concentrate on what I consider to be the most disturbing aspect of my research—the increasing "romanticization" of violence—and more specifically, the frightening power and potential of the new video game technologies.

Let me begin by reflecting a bit on the information included on the recently released videotapes made by Eric Harris and Dylan Kleibold shortly before the Columbine High School shootings last year.

It is very clear that Harris and Klebold wanted to tell the world a story whose script they seem to have learned through the entertainment media—particularly from ultra-violent films and video games. Harris tells his story in front of a video camera with a bottle of Jack Daniels and a sawed-off shotgun cradled

in his lap. He calls the gun Arlene, after a favorite character in the Doom video game.

Harris and Klebold saw themselves as important media figures, whose story would be worthy of a filmmaker like Steven Spielberg or Quentin Tarintino. The fact that Harris and Klebold created these videotapes reminds me of the Mickey and Mallory characters in Oliver Stone's film *Natural Born Killers* who became media stars as a result of a murderous rampage across the country. It is no accident that the film was a favorite of Harris and Klebold.

I would like to argue that films and video games not only teach children about violence, but also how to be violent. When violence is stylized, romanticized and choreographed, it can be stunningly beautiful and seductive. At the same time, it encourages children and adolescents to assume a rhetorical stance that equates violence with style and personal empowerment.

It does matter that we romanticize and stylize violence in films and video games.

It does matter that children and adolescents can put themselves into the virtual body of a killer in first-person shooter games.

It matters because a computer or video game is a teaching machine. Here is the logic: highly skilled players learn the lesson of game through practice. As a result, they learn the lesson of the machine and its software—and thus achieve a higher score. They are behaviorally reinforced as they play the game and thus they are being taught. Have you ever considered what it is they are being taught?

Consider first-person shooter games such as *Quake*, *Blood*, *Doom* or the recently released *Daikatana.* These are games that provide the player with a real view perspective of the game. This is very different from the earlier tradition of video games like *Street Fighter II* or *Mortal Kombat,* in which the user viewed small, cartoon figures on the screen and then controlled their actions by manipulating them through a game controller. In contrast, a first-person shooter actually puts you inside the action of the game. The barrels of weapons like pistols and shotguns are placed at the bottom center edge of the computer screen. You can look right or left, up or down, by manipulating the computer mouse or game controller. The effect is one of literally stepping into the action of the game as a participant holding the weapon.

Lieutentant Colonel David Grossman, a former Professor of Psychology at West Point, argues that first person shooter video games “are murder simulators which over time, teach a person how to look another person in the eye and snuff their life out.”[3]

Games like *Doom* are, in fact, used by military and police organization to train people. The Marine Corps, for example, has adapted *Doom* to train soldiers in the Corps.

Some critics claim that there is little difference between what goes on in a first-person shooter and playing a game of Paintball, where players divide up on teams and hunt each other in a wood or elaborately constructed game room. To begin with, Paintball is acting that takes place in the real world. You run around a little, get tired and winded, bumped and scrapped. There are serious consequences for getting out of control as you play—in other words—the fact that the game is physical and tangible means that it has limits. These limits not only include your own endurance, but the rules and procedures followed by your fellow players.

In a first-person shooter like *Quake* there are no boundaries or limits. The more "extreme" you are (a terminology often used in describing the action of the games), the more likely you are to win. Paul Keegan explains that in John Romero's recently released first-person shooter game *Daikatana*:

Physical reality suggests that you are sitting in a chair operating a mouse and a keyboard. But with the computer screen replacing your field of vision, you believe you're actually creeping around a corner, causing your breath to shorten. Afraid an enemy is lying in wait, you feel your pulse quicken. When the monster jumps out, real adrenaline roars through your body. And few things in life are more exhilarating than spinning around and blowing the damn things to kingdom come, the flying gibs so lifelike you can almost feel wet blood.[4]

What is going on here is clearly different than just a game of Paintball or "Cowboys and Indians." However, the creators of first-person shooters just don't understand that there is a problem. John Carmack, the main creator of *Quake*, for example, considers the game nothing more than "playing Cowboys and Indians, except with visual effects."[5] In a recent interview, Carmack was reminded that in the past kids playing Cowboys and Indians weren't able to blow their brothers' heads off. His response was to laugh and say: "But you wished you could."[6]

Keep in mind this important face: in first-person shooter games, players are not responsible for what they do. There are no consequences for other children, for families, or for society. As Mark Slouka explains in reference to the CD-ROM video game *Night Trap*, the game allows its players: "To inflict pain. Without responsibility. Without consequences. The punctured flesh will heal at the touch of a button, the scream disappear into cyberspace."[7]

Games that employ a first-person shooter model represent a significant step beyond the tiny cartoon figures that were

included in *Mortal Kombat* in the mid-1990s. In fact, there has been a continuous evolution of the realism of these games as computing power has increased and become cheaper.

Much of this has to do with the enormous increase in computing power. A moderately fast desktop computer with a Pentium II chip that could be purchased for under $1,000 today has the speed of a $20 million Cray supercomputer from the mid-1980s.[8]

Even more interesting is the availability of inexpensive game consoles. Sony's dominance of this market has recently been challenged by Sega's amazing 200 Mhz Dreamcast game machine—available for nearly a year now in North America. It will soon be superseded by Microsoft's X-Box, which is designed specifically for interactive gaming, and which is set for release in the fall of 2001. The X-Box will be driven by a 600 Mhz Intel Pentium III chip. It will cost less than $500 and will allow players to go online to play games. The machine and the programs that will drive it represent what is potentially an extraordinary virtual reality simulator.

Larry Smarr, director of the National Center for Supercomputer Applications in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, believes that systems like these represent "the transition from people playing video games to a world where we will create our own fantasies in cyberspace."[9]

In many respects, the content of violent video games represents a giant social and educational experiment. Will these ultra violent games actually teach children to behave and view the world in markedly different ways? To repeat an earlier argument, video and computer games are, in fact, highly effective teaching machines. You learn the rules, play the game, get better at it, accumulate a higher score, and eventually win. As Mark Slouka argues, the implications of new technologies like video games "are social: the questions they pose, broadly ethical; the risks they entail, unprecedented. They are the cultural equivalent of genetic engineering, except that in this experiment, even more than the other one, *we* will be the potential new hybrids, the two-pound mice."[10]

It is very possible, that the people killed in the last few years as the result of "school shootings" may in fact be the first victims/results of this experiment. If this is indeed the case, it is an experiment *we* need to stop at once. Some things are too dangerous to experiment with.

NOTES

[1] Eugene F. Provenzo, Jr., *Video Kids: Making Sense of Nintendo* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

[2] See: Eugene F. Provenzo, Jr., "`Brave New Video': Video Games and the Emergence of Interactive Television for Children," *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, Vol. 1, #1, Spring 1995, pp. 151-162; and Eugene F. Provenzo, Jr.,"Video Games and the Emergence of Interactive Media for Children," in Shirley R. Steinberg and Joe L. Kincheloe *Kinderculture: The Corporate Construction of Childhood* (Denver, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), pp. 103-113.

[3] Claymon, Deborah, "Video-game industry seeks to deflect blame for violence," *Miami Herald*, July 2, 1999, 3E.

[4] Paul Keegan, "A Game Boy In the Cross Hairs," *The New York Times Magazine*, May 23, 1999, p. 38.
[5] Ibid, p. 39.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Mark Slouka, *The War of the Worlds: Cyberspace and the High-Tech Assault on Reality* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), p. 13.
[8] David E. Sanger, "High-Tech Exports Hit Antiquated Speed Bumps, *The New York Times*, June 13, 1999, WK 5.
[9] John Markoff, "Silicon Valley's Awesome Look at New Sony Toy," *The New York Times*, March 19, 1999, p. C1.
[10] Ibid.